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Book Review of *Cultivating a Movement: Excerpts from an Oral History of Organic Farming and Sustainable Agriculture on California's Central Coast.*

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Book Review

Cultivating a Movement: Excerpts from an Oral History of Organic Farming and Sustainable Agriculture on California's Central Coast. Edited by I. Reti and S. Rabkin 2011. UC Santa Cruz Library, Santa Cruz, California. 299 p., US $19.95, ISBN 9-780972-33431, paper.

Often the most compelling evidence for success of organic farming comes from the personal stories of farmers. Coupled with reports on the application of science in organics, the practical knowledge of people in the field provides a rich foundation for the ongoing growth of this intriguing sector of the food system. This collection of interviews by the staff of the Regional History Project is one unique activity of the UC Santa Cruz library, and a valuable contribution to the literature on organic systems.

In stark contrast to the industrial, large-scale monocultures that dominate the agricultural scene in California, 'tucked away along rivers, bluffs and canyons, and even within city limits, another, alternative agricultural landscape is emerging. The land tells this story through the voices of those who farm the soil and devote their lives to the sustainable agriculture and organic farming movement' (from the introduction by Congressman Sam Farr, D-CA). An unlikely complement to the high-tech production and global marketing systems, the organic food business continues to be the fastest-growing component of the food industry.

With focus on local production and direct sales to consumers, organic farmers often put high value in 'relationship marketing'. As the stories from these interviews reveal, the crops, systems and sales strategies are as varied and creative as the farmers who designed them. This diversity is reflected in the crops grown, the crop/animal systems and interactions, and the long-term plans of owners.

Crop diversity is most prevalent in the small vegetable and fruit farms designed to meet consumers' demand in local farmers' markets, in community-supported agriculture schemes, in farm shop sales and in marketing to local restaurants. The farmers practice crop rotations, use cover crops and integrate ruminants and other livestock to efficiently use crop residues and non-marketable products. Diverse spatial and temporal production strategies favor non-chemical integrated pest management and provide adequate nutrients to maintain soil fertility without importing any products from off the farm. The design of these self-sufficient systems leads to greater profitability than systems that depend on purchased organic inputs, many of which are expensive and have limited effectiveness.

Although most organic farms exhibit high levels of diversity, and certification requires rotations that include diverse species, some farmers opt for specialization in a few signature crops and animal products. Examples include mixed salad greens, heirloom varieties of specialties such as tomatoes, organic milk and cheese. The efficiencies of scale achieved on some farms allow sale to larger outlets such as Whole Foods, but most farmers opt to remain at a family scale or employ several workers or interns. Social responsibility looms large in most of the interviews in the book.

Another striking element of diversity emerges from the descriptions of farmers as well as researchers. Some have come from the mainstream, where bad experiences with farm chemicals encouraged them to seek other options. More often people have come from small, diversified farms or from the city, seeking a productive career and fulfilling lifestyle. Although sometimes long on ideals but short on prior experience, many new farmers arrive with energy, enthusiasm and innovative ideas about creating a profitable yet equitable food system for the future. Others were farm workers steeped in traditional crops and methods, or came from the traditional agricultural sector seeking independence as entrepreneurs in the food system. The interviews reveal a wide diversity of backgrounds, skills and motivations. It would be a serious error to generalize about organic farms as small, low-tech or traditional, although most are labor-intensive and clearly focused on local markets.

Agricultural organizations have emerged to support this movement in California. The United Farm Workers took on the complex issues of labor rights in agriculture. The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association and the Rural Development Center in the Salinas Valley developed farming and business incubators for Hispanic farmers. Well known in academic circles is the UCSC Farm and Garden which has hosted apprentices on organic gardening and marketing since the early 1970s. Now the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, the center continues to enroll apprentices each year and maintains a modest research program with the Department of Environmental Studies. The Center conducts both student-oriented courses and extension

programs through on-farm research, demonstrations, newsletter and field tours.

Cultivating a Movement is an interesting, thoughtful and well-written collection of reports on activities of real farmers, successful entrepreneurs and current academics. It is an inspiring book that provides a history of organic farming on the California coast, as well as a model for community building in organics that could be accomplished elsewhere.

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